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ABSTRACT

Finding high-quality, affordable child care is difficult and time-consuming. In the United States, government agencies, local communities, and national organizations are developing innovative child care consumer education strategies--including Internet-based efforts--to help parents with this task. Child care consumer education provides the information parents need to assess their needs, locate services, evaluate quality, and choose the best possible care for their children. Families looking for child care may benefit from the information offered through multimedia consumer education campaigns or through services offered by community child care resource and referral agencies. The Internet, when coupled with other modes of information dissemination, can also be an effective tool. Although the Internet provides an enormous amount of information, it also has obstacles and pitfalls around which a family may have to maneuver to find applicable information. Information providers need to study, evaluate, and improve consumer education initiatives to best meet the child care needs of all children and their families--both online and offline. (A list of World Wide Web sites mentioned in the paper and a description of the National Child Care Information Center are appended.) (LPP)

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Child Care Consumer Education on the Internet

Anne Goldstein ■

Abstract

Finding high-quality, affordable child care can be difficult and time-consuming. In the United States, government agencies, local communities, tribal governments, and national organizations are developing innovative child care consumer education strategies—including Internet-based efforts—to help parents with this task. Child care consumer education provides the information parents need to assess their needs, locate services, evaluate quality, and choose the best possible care for their children. Families looking for child care may benefit from the information offered through multimedia consumer education campaigns or through services offered by community child care resource and referral agencies. The Internet, when coupled with other modes of information dissemination, can also be an effective tool. Although the Internet provides an enormous amount of information, it also has obstacles and pitfalls around which a family may have to maneuver to find applicable information. Information providers need to study, evaluate, and improve consumer education initiatives to best meet the child care needs of all children and their families—both online and offline.

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Introduction

One of the most important decisions that parents make is choosing child care for their children. However, for many families, finding child care can be a difficult process. It is estimated that "as many as one in four workers in the United States is currently dealing with child care problems and that 62 percent of working parents report major problems in finding quality child care" (National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, 1996, p. 34). In 1995, more than 85% of children whose mothers worked full-time regularly received care from a nonparental caregiver. In addition, 75% of children whose mothers work part-time regularly receive care from providers other than their parents (West, Wright, & Hausken, 1995). Projections of labor force participation rates suggest that the need for child care will continue to grow as more women enter the workforce (Hernandez, 1995).

While introducing President Clinton at the October 23, 1997, White House Conference on Child Care, parent Kathryn Carliner spoke of her experience in searching for high-quality child care: "finding that level of high-quality child care today is an overwhelming challenge."

The *I Am Your Child* campaign, a national public awareness and engagement campaign, surveyed parents with children from birth to 3 to find out what their most pressing concerns were. One of the questions parents asked most often was "How can I find a trustworthy child care provider to take care of my child?"

Families are worried. They need high-quality, affordable child care so that they can succeed as parents and as workers, and they should not have to make do with inadequate choices. At the White House Conference, President Clinton made this point clear: *"No parent should ever have to choose between a decent wage and caring for a child."* Across the country, state agencies, tribal governments, local communities, and national organizations are developing effective and innovative child care consumer education strategies—including the Internet-based efforts—to help parents find the high-quality care they need.

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Child Care Consumer Education Helps Families Succeed

Child care consumer education provides parents with the information they need to assess their needs, locate services, evaluate quality, and choose the best possible care for their children. Recognizing the value that child care consumer education can have for families, the Child Care and Development Block Grant, the federal child care subsidy program, requires states to collect and disseminate consumer education information to the families they serve and to the general public. Consumer education strategies are designed to help families address two key issues in child care: availability and quality of care.

Availability of Care

The availability of child care changes from community to community, from one part of a state to another. It also varies from one type of care to another. A study in 1995 found that in low-income neighborhoods, 88% of the available spaces in centers were filled (Ross, 1996), leaving families with few options. Availability may also be limited in some geographic regions, particularly in rural areas where there are fewer centers or family child care providers to help meet the need, and where the available care may not be near a family's home or workplace. Finding particular types of care, such as child care for infants, school-age children, and children with special needs, may pose exceptional problems. One study found that vacancies for infants and toddlers are especially limited: fewer than 10% of all vacancies could be filled by infants and toddlers (Kisker et al., 1991).

Availability of care is also affected by the times that parents need care. In 1990, 7.2 million mothers with almost 12 million children under 15 worked during nontraditional hours (U.S. Department of Labor, 1995). These families work split shifts, weekend hours, late evening hours, and early morning hours, and they need care for their children during these times. Yet, only 3% of centers offer evening care, making locating child care a real challenge for many working families (Hofferth, 1996). Consumer education campaigns can help families identify caregivers who meet their needs.

Quality of Care

Families need child care services that meet their needs—such as compatible program goals, convenient hours of operation, a location that is close to home or work, and affordability. They also require care that is safe and enjoyable, and that meets the developmental needs of their children. Child care consumer education provides families with information and tools so that they can make the best decision for their children's care.

> Parents may not recognize that an arrangement is likely to be of poor quality if they do not know which features of a child care setting or a provider's background are associated with quality. Lack of information may thus lead parents to use arrangements that are less reliable or of lower quality than they might find if they had better information. Lower-quality child care settings may adversely affect employment and children's development. (Ross, 1996, p. 1)

Cost, Quality and Child Outcomes in Child Care Centers, a 1995 study from the University of Colorado, found that there was "evidence of inadequate consumer knowledge" about the components of quality child care, and that this lack of knowledge "creates market imperfections and reduces incentive for some centers to provide good-quality care." Parents, as informed consumers, can make better choices and can increase the demand for high-quality services. Informed child care choices are essential. The goal of child care consumer education is to provide information to parents so that they may select high-quality services that meet the needs of their families. Through the process of selecting a child care setting, developing and sustaining a partnership with the care provider, observing the program and providing ongoing feedback, and participating in the development of program goals, parents play a critical role in assuring high-quality care for their children.

Child Care Consumer Education Strategies

To reach the broadest possible audience of families seeking and using child care, individualized consumer education and multimedia public awareness campaigns are utilized. All families currently using or looking for child care may benefit from the information offered through a multimedia consumer education campaign. However, this information is generally very broad, and families that are looking for child care services either for the first time or to replace existing care may prefer to access the one-on-one services offered by community child care resource and referral (CCR&R) agencies.

The delivery of child care consumer education by telephone or via face-to-face counseling is an approach that gives parents personalized attention and allows the consumer educator to tailor information to the client's needs (Mitchell, Cooperstein, & Larner, 1992). Direct consultation supports the child care decision-making efforts of parents either individually or in small parent groups.

Multimedia public awareness campaigns are designed to provide consumers, potential consumers, employers, and others in the community with general information on the importance of high-quality child care. These campaigns may involve the distribution of various printed materials, such as brochures, pamphlets, checklists to help parents identify high-quality care, fact sheets, and articles. Other community-wide strategies used to communicate the message include billboards and announcements on public transportation. Some campaigns have also included flyers containing general messages about the importance of high-quality care as an enclosure with utility bills and other mailings.

In addition to these print resources, longer consumer education pieces have been developed as videotapes that are played in hospital maternity centers, doctors' offices, health clinics, and social service agencies. Another method of sharing public awareness messages is through public service announcements (PSAs) on radio and television. Many communities have used local events such as health fairs and school functions as further opportunities to share child care consumer education information.

Many states and local communities have turned to electronic resources, including the Internet, to promote child care consumer education. The Internet is unique in that it can bring many features of a multimedia campaign together in one place for families to access.

One example of a nationwide multimedia consumer education campaign is Child Care Aware. Child Care Aware provides information on what high-quality child care is and helps families seek high-quality child care in their communities. Child Care Aware maintains a toll-free parent information line (800-424-2246) that helps parents locate resources in their community and provides information about high-quality care. Checklists and other materials are also available electronically and in print. In addition, with support from General Mills, information on what parents should look for when choosing child care was made available on boxes of Cheerios® cereal.

Another example of a national multimedia effort is the *I Am Your Child* campaign. The *I Am Your Child* campaign works to educate the public about the importance of the first 3 years of life. Their information dissemination efforts have included pamphlets for parents and community leaders, a nationwide prime-time television special, a video and CD-ROM for parents that include interviews with child development experts, and a World Wide Web site that includes general information on brain development, resources to help choose child care, links to other sites, and information about books, videos, and organizations that can provide additional materials. In conjunction with the Ad Council, the *I Am Your Child* campaign also utilized rotating advertising space on an Internet search engine to provide a link to their Web site.

Effective Child Care Consumer Education on the Internet

As the previous examples indicate, the Internet, especially when coupled with other modes of information dissemination, can be an effective mechanism for getting out the message that high-quality child care is important to children, families, and communities. Types of child care consumer education information online currently include checklists for use in evaluating child care programs, lists of providers, information on licensing regulations, articles, and current research.

Meeting the Information Needs of Families

Families come in all sizes, with varying needs and desires for their children's care. "Information is most powerful when presented from the consumer's point of view. For this reason, the language and thought process of the parent seeking child care (i.e., the consumer) should inform the design and delivery of consumer education" (Mitchell, Cooperstein, & Larner, 1992, p. 35). While the majority of the information available on the Internet is in English, sites such as the National Parent Information Network (NPIN) and the National Network for Child Care have led the way in providing materials for families in both Spanish and English. Unfortunately, most consumer education resources on the Internet do not as yet reflect the diversity of the families seeking

child care. Families who are familiar with search engines such as AltaVista may choose to utilize the online translation service that is provided.

Seeking and Finding Useful Information on the Internet

Child care information is abundant on the Internet. However, it may not be specifically targeted or organized to meet the needs of all families. A simple search on the words "child care" can yield over 200,000 related links. A search on "child care center" returns approximately 13,000 links. A further narrowing to search for "quality child care" brings the number of links down to 6,000. "Choosing child care" and "finding child care" net about 700 sites. Combining these ideas into a search for "choosing quality child care" generates about 180 links. While this is a more manageable number of sites to review, some families may be challenged to find the time or the resources to stay online for extended periods.

While child care information is abundant, finding community-specific information on the Internet may be difficult. Child care information is posted by a wide array of agencies, groups, and individuals, including state and local governments, colleges and universities, federal agencies, libraries, media, real estate agencies, state and local child care resource and referral agencies, national organizations, foundations, businesses, religious groups and organizations, child care centers and providers, and other community organizations.

The variety of organizations posting child care consumer education information creates several challenges to parents seeking information on the Internet. First, each organization posts the information in a different way with a different purpose in mind. Parents seeking electronic information may have to visit a large number of sites to get all the information they are seeking. In addition, parents may have no way to measure the validity or reliability of the information on a site. Some families may find that visiting several sites and developing or customizing their own guides and checklists is of value.

An example of how community agencies are providing families with convenient access to local information is the MOST Initiative (Making the Most of Out-of-School Time). One of the MOST communities, the Seattle MOST Initiative, used information from the local resource and referral agency to create an Internet-based comprehensive database of out-of-school time activities for children and youth. The database is available as free Windows software to agencies that serve families. Also available on their home page is information about the need for high-quality care for school-age children and links to child care and other community databases. A parallel home page is available in Spanish.

State and Community Resources on the Internet

States and communities are utilizing the Internet as one part of their strategy to promote informed child care choices. As with other online child care information, the type and amount of information available on state agency home pages varies widely. Several states have used the Internet to create useful resources for parents, with extensive information designed to meet the needs of families. For example, North Carolina has several pages that provide child care consumer education. These include a "What Parents Should Know about Child Care" home page with a directory of regulated child care providers, searchable by county, city, or zip code. The information available about the programs includes name, address, and phone number, type of license, hours of care, ages of children served, capacity, sanitation rating, and complaint history. Information is available on how to participate in the child care subsidy program, and there is also a listing of local child care resource and referral programs. Other resources include links to organizations with information on choosing child care.

The Web site of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services includes extensive information on how to choose high-quality child care, including the full text of a brochure developed by the agency, information on applying for a child care subsidy, standards for centers and family child care homes, and links to local resource and referral agencies.

To provide targeted and effective comprehensive consumer education, the Internet is especially useful when used in tandem with services in the community. Resource and referral agencies are poised to utilize the Internet as an effective communication system for sharing information. The California Child Care Resource and Referral Network Web site provides information for parents such as "Who to call for free help in finding child care in California," "Tips for finding child care that works best for your family," information about the

Parent Voices Project, resource and referral child care data, and an index of the state-funded resource and referral agencies, such as Connections for Children. Connections for Children provides information on choosing child care, including "Selecciónando Cuidado de Niños," parent resources, community resources, a map of the service area, information on their community outreach programs, and how to contact their office for services.

Another example of community-based Internet consumer education is on the Initiatives for Children, Inc., Web site. Initiatives for Children is a resource and referral agency serving Houston and Southeast Texas. The home page includes information on their services and facts about child care. The site also has an online form available for their referral services. Requests for referrals can also be received by phone or fax.

Challenges of Internet-based Child Care Consumer Education Strategies

As previously stated, the sheer volume of child care consumer education information available on the Internet, combined with the nonspecific nature of the material, may require parents to invest a great deal of their time and resources in order to use the available information effectively. Community-specific information may be difficult to locate. "An effective *information architecture* guides information seekers to what they need" (Davenport, 1997). Many families may not be able to spend hours online seeking child care information or waiting for pages with large graphics to download. One option for alerting information seekers to potentially useful Web sites is to utilize online and offline marketing strategies. Announcements and flyers about consumer education should include Web addresses. Web sites can utilize marquee-style messages (one type of Java applet) that point users toward specific content areas of the site. Parents accessing Internet-based consumer education resources may experience frustrations caused by basic technological difficulties, such as busy signals, site transience, the disorganized nature of Internet search resources, and lack of controlled indexes (Urr, 1995). The issue of equity also needs to be addressed so that access to the Internet is available to families of all income levels, cultures, languages, and needs.

Conclusions

To be effective, child care consumer education on the Internet should be developed with parental input and user feedback. This consumer involvement is important to the design and format of the information delivery, as well as to the amount and type of information sought. In designing online strategies, consumer educators need to provide information that is:

- presented from the consumer's point of view, with literacy and language needs met;
- easy to find and well publicized to the target audiences;
- responsive to the needs of families looking for high-quality child care;
- continually updated; and
- one of many child care consumer education strategies used in a community.

The Internet is a communication and information tool that is accessed by millions of individuals each day. Information providers can benefit from sharing successes and working collaboratively to provide the most useful services to their constituencies.

One of the most positive aspects of electronic information dissemination is the ease with which information providers can link with other sites to enhance and broaden the resources available to parents. The fundamental task for consumer educators in providing child care consumer education on the Internet consists of collecting useful information, synthesizing it into a format that meets the needs of families, and presenting it in a timely and interesting way to the user.

The Internet provides the opportunity for families to access an enormous amount of useful information. It also has obstacles and pitfalls around which a family may have to maneuver in order to be successful in accessing child care information. As more information is made available through this electronic resource, we will need to continue to study, evaluate, and improve consumer education initiatives to best meet the child care needs of all children and their families—both online and offline.

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This document was produced for informational purposes only and does not constitute an official endorsement of any resource, practice, or organization by the National Child Care Information Center, the Administration for Children and Families, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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APPENDIX

Referenced Internet Sites and the National Child Care Information Center

Universal Resource Locators (URLs) for the World Wide Web sites referenced in the text are listed below:

***I Am Your Child* Campaign**
http://www.iamyourchild.org

Child Care Aware
http://www.naccrra.net/childcareaware/index.htm

National Parent Information Network (NPIN)
http://npin.org/respar/texts/chldcare/deleasu.html

National Network for Child Care
http://www.nncc.org/Choose.Quality.Care/spanish.choose.html

AltaVista
http://www.altavista.com

Seattle Making the Most of Out-Of-School Time (MOST) project
http://www.ci.seattle.wa.us/most/
http://www.ci.seattle.wa.us/most/espanol

North Carolina—What Parents Should Know about Child Care
http://www.dhr.state.nc.us/DHR/DCD/parents.htm

Illinois Department of Children and Family Services
http://www.state.il.us/dcfs/ccyrncon.htm

California Child Care Resource and Referral Network
http://www.rrnetwork.org

Connections for Children
http://www.cfc-ca.org

Initiatives for Children, Inc.
http://www.ini-children.org

Note that because of the ever-changing nature of the Internet, some addresses may not be available, and pages may have different resources than described.

National Child Care Information Center

The National Child Care Information Center (NCCIC) (800-616-2242; http://nccic.org) is an activity of the Child Care Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The primary role of the NCCIC is to complement, enhance, and promote child care linkages and to serve as a mechanism for supporting high-quality, comprehensive services for children and families through support to states, territories, tribes, policy makers, child care organizations, providers, parents, and the general public. ■